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SUBJECT: WFP'S SCHOOL FEEDING EFFORTS IN IRAQ

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Summary

¶1. (SBU) WFP's school feeding programs in Iraq are ongoing. During the academic year 2003-2004 in the three northern governorates, WFP provided technical assistance to the local authorities to guarantee a smooth continuation of school feeding activities targeting over 700,000 students. Between March and May, in the center/south of Iraq, WFP carried out a pilot school-feeding project benefiting 105,000 students, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health (MOH) and Ministry of Education (MOE). WFP has now issued an Emergency Appeal (July 2004-June 2005, valued at U.S. \$54.1 million) targeted to primary school children and vulnerable groups. US Mission is strongly supportive of this undertaking. For the longer-term, in our view, debt relief could be a key element in the resuscitation of Iraq's primary education sector. End summary.

Background

¶2. (U) By the end of the 1970s, Iraq was one of the wealthiest and most developed countries in the Middle East with a thriving economy sustained by sales from large oil reserves. Social investments by the Government from 1975-1985 raised the standard of living and improved the country's social sectors. Iraq had one of the best education systems in the region with respect to both access and quality: education was free at all levels, and all necessary teaching and learning materials were provided. After the Iran-Iraq War the quality of education began to deteriorate and after the 1990-91 Gulf War, it decreased dramatically.

¶3. (U) By 2000, only 76.3 percent of children aged 6-11 were attending primary school despite the fact that primary education was compulsory. In rural areas, less than 50 percent of girls were attending school compared to 80 percent in urban areas. Dropout rates for primary school children nearly doubled over the 20-year period from 1978-1998, and more than doubled for girls. In the 2000/2001 academic year, the number of children in the sixth class was only 45 percent of the number of children in the first class.

WFP efforts in school feeding from April 2003 onwards

¶4. (U) During the academic year 2003-2004 in the three northern governorates, WFP provided technical assistance to the local authorities to guarantee a smooth continuation of school feeding activities targeting over 700,000 students. WFP will continue provision of High Energy Biscuits for distribution to school children and technical assistance to the authorities in the north until the end of 2004.

¶5. (U) Between March and May, in the center/south of Iraq, WFP carried out a pilot school-feeding project benefiting 105,000 students, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health (MOH) and Ministry of Education (MOE). MOH and MOE staff visited school feeding projects in Egypt and Chile to

study the possibility of replicating best practices. A survey to assess the efficacy of the school program is

ongoing. The final report is expected in August.

WFP complementary "safety-net" efforts

16. (U) WFP is also collaborating with World Health Organization (WHO), Ministry of Trade (MOT), Ministry of Health/Nutrition Research Institute (MOH/NRI) and UNICEF on a Wheat Flour Fortification program. The stakeholders presented in March an action plan to the Wheat Flour Fortification National Committee in Baghdad. The plan, covering the period 2004-2007, aims at enabling the production of fortified wheat flour in all 177 existing mills by end of 2005. This would help reduce the prevalence of iron deficiency anemia in women. It is expected also to reduce 'Neural Tube' birth defects. Results of the plan will be measured through monitoring. A comprehensive household survey on consumption of fortified wheat is planned for 2007.

The WFP Multi-Agency School Feeding Assessment-August 2003

17. (U) WFP conducted with UNICEF a school feeding assessment for Iraq August 4-15, 2003. Results were as follows:

a. There was a great deal of interest on the part of Ministry officials, school administrators, teachers and parents for an integrated school-feeding program. There was general recognition that school feeding can help to increase enrollment and attendance; improve children's capacity to concentrate and assimilate information by relieving short-term hunger and contribute to both the improvement of children's nutrition and possibly their academic performance.

b. Moreover, there was support and recognition of the need for nutrition, health and sanitation education and, in some areas of the country, a deworming program. The Ministry officials interviewed were unanimous in their support for a program with 100 percent coverage of primary school children. When the mission team suggested that the program target the vulnerable geographic areas of the country, the response was that even wealthy countries have school feeding programs, why should Iraq, potentially a wealthy country, be any different. Many of the Ministry officials, teachers and parents referenced a small-scale school-feeding program that was implemented from 1979-82 and provided cheese, eggs, fruit and milk for all primary school children.

c. The Iraqis interviewed said that they wanted a high quality school feeding program with fresh produce provided not only for children in primary schools, but also for those in kindergartens, literacy classes, schools for the handicapped, and boarding schools. They also felt that teachers and cleaning staff should be provided food at the schools.

d. The mission team agreed that a school meal program should be national in scope and involve a menu more comprehensive and varied than biscuits, utilizing fresh foods. The team also feels that the program in the longer term should generate business and employment opportunities for Iraqis.

e. Feasible options are limited, however, by security constraints, the current lack of trained staff, the inadequacy of the primary school infrastructure (in terms of water, electricity, kitchens, cold storage, etc.), and the reduced school day (children are in school for 4 rather than

6 hours/day as a result of double and triple shifts and other factors). The mission team therefore recommended beginning with a pilot "biscuit and drink" program, targeted to specific areas of the country and not heavily reliant on school infrastructure.

WFP Assistance to vulnerable groups program July 2004- end June 2005 - Emergency Operation (EMOP) 10360.0 "Assistance to Primary School Children and Vulnerable Groups

18. (U) WFP has just finalized a new EMOP that takes into consideration the security environment and the absence of United Nations international staff in-country. This project is intended to provide targeted food aid to primary school children, malnourished children, pregnant and lactating mothers, as well as the chronically sick in particularly vulnerable districts. The food aid will be complemented with training and capacity building in food security and

vulnerability analysis.

19. (U) Assistance will be provided for an initial period of one year to 972,800 primary school children, 350,250 pregnant and lactating women, 223,200 malnourished children and their families, and 6,400 tuberculosis patients. WFP will also assist in building the capacity of Iraqi institutions to monitor and analyze food security indicators and design appropriate responses. Note. In addition to numbers above, there are an estimated 770,000 primary school children in the three Northern Governorates of Erbil, Dohuk and Suleymaniyyah whose schools will be supported with provision of biscuits for the first semester of school year 2004-2005. End Note. The program, valued at US \$54.2 million - covers the period July 2004-June 2005.

10. (U) The objectives of the vulnerable group project will be to:

- a. Increase enrollment and regular attendance of children, in particular girls, in primary schools;
- b. Increase attendance of malnourished children and pregnant and lactating women at local healthcare facilities;
- c. Improve the nutritional status of malnourished children and pregnant and lactating women;
- d. Secure regular attendance of tuberculosis patients enrolled in the National Program at local healthcare facilities;
- e. Improve the knowledge and daily practices of mothers and caretakers of young children on appropriate feeding practices;
- f. Improve Iraqi institutional capacity in monitoring and analyzing food security.

Comment from Ambassador Hall

11. (SBU) This EMOP deserves our full support. In the longer-term, in addition to traditional sources of funding (McGovern-Dole, PL 480 Title II, ESF, etc), Iraq owes the U.S. Department of Agriculture approximately U.S. \$4 billion on defaulted General Sales Manager (GSM) credit guarantee loans and interest dating back to 1991. While the Paris Club discussions might be protracted, and a number of complications could arise, the development of a national school feeding effort (that inter alia could involve imported products) might be a reasonable quid-pro-quo for debt forgiveness. WFP has vast experience in school feeding endeavors and a solid track record in Iraq. Debt relief could be a key element in the resuscitation of Iraq's

primary education sector.

12. (U) Baghdad minimize considered. Hall

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